HISTORICAL NOTES

ON THE DEVOTION AND THE ARCHCONFRATERNITY OF THE MOST HOLY MARY, MOTHER OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE, HELPER OF CHRISTIANS

§ 1 – THE ORIGINS

In the area where today stands the Church of St. Charles at the Catinari in Rome, there still stood at the beginning of the 17th century the small church of St. Blaise dell'Anello.

In place of that modest little church obtained in the Holy City, the Barnabites, on February 26, 1612—only two years after the canonization of St. Charles Borromeo, the illustrious Patron of their Order—solemnly blessed the first stone of the present temple. Elegant in the sobriety of its lines and decoration, it is royally crowned by that joyful golden dome, which in Rome is second only to St. Peter's in its interior splendor.

Yet the devout Christian who enters here, after a fleeting glance at the dome which suddenly appears and irresistibly draws the eye of anyone stepping into the threshold, and after the due adoration of Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament, immediately turns toward a hidden corner to the right of the high altar, and kneels in prayer before a most gentle image of the Blessed Virgin.

"It would require—the words were well written—the pen of an artist and a saint to give an exact idea of the perfection, the heavenly beauty, and the angelic grace that radiate from this canvas, where the purity of the Virgin so harmoniously blends with the tenderness of the Mother.

The Holy Virgin is clothed in a robe of purple and a mantle of blue; a light and transparent veil covers her head and gracefully falls upon her shoulders as she inclines slightly to the right. She holds in her arms the Divine Child and presses Him lovingly to her virginal breast, gently lowering her eyes upon the adorable face of that Child—the fairest of the sons of men. What grace

rests upon the pure lips of the Virgin Mother, parted in a smile of heaven! One remains enraptured before this enchanting Child whose lively eyes are fixed upon the face of His tender Mother, as if to read within it her thoughts and desires. Does not the hand of the Child clasped in that of His Mother indicate the sacred source of Mary's power, the trust and abandonment that we must place in her? What reciprocal affection, what sweet familiarity between Mother and Son is revealed in the posture of Jesus and Mary!" (Dubois).

For two centuries now, this Image has seen before it, prostrate in humble supplication or fervent thanksgiving, her children—young and old, alone or in crowds. Its history is intimately linked with the history of the Church itself.

Around 1664, there was a plan to transport into the upper choir of the new Church—where the Religious gathered, and still gather, for community prayers—a miraculous fresco of the Blessed Virgin taken from the original house of St. Paul at Piazza Colonna. But when it was being placed in its intended site, the fresco fell and was shattered. To compensate the Fathers for so great a loss, the architect offered them a precious canvas of the Blessed Virgin, considered the finest work of Scipione Pulzone, called "Il Gaetano," from Gaeta, his native town, the "Roman Van Dyck." Before this most devout image, the Fathers prayed always with confidence—and not in vain.

A singular event occurred in 1626: a pious Barnabite, Father Biagio Palma (1575–1735), having made a pilgrimage to Loreto—where he had been ordained priest—in order to obtain from the Blessed Virgin the means to complete the Church, which had long remained unfinished, suddenly felt inspired to appeal to Cardinal Leni. At first he obtained nothing but kind words. But the following year, upon the Cardinal's death, it was to everyone's astonishment that his testament left the greater part of his wealth for the completion of St. Charles. The work was soon accomplished, with that splendor still visible today. Father Palma left a lengthy handwritten account of the event in the Archives of the College, to eternalize its memory and as an encouragement to all to turn in times of need with lively confidence to the provident Mother of God.

This manuscript fell into the hands of Father Gennaro Maffetti (1670–1740), pastor of

St. Charles for 18 years. Having read it before the Image of the Blessed Virgin in the choir, he felt moved to promote among the faithful devotion to so beneficent a Mother in the best way he could. Therefore, having a faithful copy of the same Image made (apparently by a humble Barnabite Brother, Pietro Valentini), in 1732—perhaps on July

13—he exposed it in a small corridor between the presbytery of the high altar and the chapel of St. Cecilia. The amiable aspect of the Virgin and the sweetness of the added title *"Mater Divinae Providentiae"* touched and enkindled the devotion of the faithful.

The graces and favors of every kind obtained from Mary from that time on showed how greatly the Blessed Virgin was pleased to be invoked under this title.

That small and simple corridor soon became a rich sanctuary, filled with votive offerings and adorned with paintings and gilding. On July 13, 1732—the sixth Sunday after Pentecost, when the Gospel recalled the miracle of Jesus feeding five thousand with five loaves—a first modest feast was held; on July 10, 1735, it was repeated with great solemnity, establishing that it should be celebrated every year.

In 1742, the altar was raised before which, besides an immense crowd of people and priests, there would later kneel princes and more than one of the most glorious Pontiffs to sit upon the Chair of St. Peter. Nor was the devotion and the fame of the prodigious Image confined to Rome, but spread to far-off lands, whence people came in crowds, even barefoot, to venerate the Mother of Providence in devout pilgrimages to the Church of St. Charles, where they rendered their first homage to Mary through the reconciliation of their hearts with her Divine Son in the Sacrament of Penance.

§ 2 – The Archconfraternity

To render such devotion more fruitful and stable, Pope Benedict XIV, by a Brief dated September 25, 1744, established a pious sodality under the title of the "Confraternity of the Mother of Divine Providence" and enriched it with many indulgences.

At that time, no Confraternity existed in Rome that was affiliated with the celebrated

Confederation of Our Lady Help of Christians, instituted on August 18, 1684, in the Church of St. Peter in Munich, Bavaria, by Pope Innocent XI after the memorable victory gained over the Turks under the walls of Vienna. However, since the great distance made it too difficult to enroll in that pious Association, the Barnabite Fathers presented petitions to Pope Gregory XVI, asking that their sacred Image be honored with the additional title of "Helper of Christians." They obtained this favor through a Rescript of His Eminence Cardinal Vicar Placido Zuria on March 10, 1834.

Five years later, the same Supreme Pontiff showed further and even greater favor toward our Sanctuary, elevating the already existing Confraternity to the rank of Archconfraternity by a Brief of July 16, 1839. He granted it all the rights and privileges already conceded by his predecessors to that of Munich and to the Confederation of the Holy Love of Mary Help of Christians in Pisa. He also conferred upon the Superior General of the Barnabites, in perpetuity, the authority to aggregate in any part of the world other sodalities erected under the same invocation.

Thus, the Archconfraternity of the Mother of Divine Providence spread everywhere with great rapidity. Even today there exist Confraternities aggregated to it, sharing in all its privileges and indulgences, not only in Italy but in every part of the world.

§ 3 – The Glories

A most lamentable event occurred: the sacred Image, enriched with many jewels and precious ornaments offered by the devotion of the faithful, was sacrilegiously robbed on February 13, 1839. Yet, as so often happens,

instead of diminishing devotion, this only increased it. When the news of the theft spread, all the devout had but one thought: to make generous reparation to the Virgin for the impious offense, by restoring to her chapel such ornaments as could never again be stolen.

The Barnabites therefore collected abundant alms to restore the chapel—formerly so very humble—in the most splendid form

possible. Work soon began and was carried out with such artistry and richness of ornament that the narrowness of the space was less regretted. Thus, on November 7, 1841, the chapel was reopened, entirely resplendent with gold and precious marbles, and His Eminence Cardinal Luigi Lambruschini, himself a Barnabite, solemnly consecrated the new altar.

The Sanctuary of Our Lady of Providence has always enjoyed the particular predilection of the Supreme Pontiffs.

- **Benedict XIV** visited it every year and brought Mary rich gifts. On February 2, 1815, Pius VII—acknowledging his debt to Mary for his return to the Eternal City from exile in France—came to the Church of St. Charles. After imparting the blessing with the Blessed Sacrament to an immense crowd, he prostrated himself in the Chapel before the miraculous Image and, as a token of gratitude, declared its altar privileged daily and in perpetuity.

- **Pius IX,** who as a boy, under the direction of Father Luigi Lambruschini—the future Cardinal and Secretary of State—served at sacred functions in our Church of St. Charles, and who later spent the first years of his priestly life under the shadow of the Sanctuary of Our Lady of Divine Providence while he was Director of the poor Hospice of Tata Giovanni, never lost any opportunity to manifest his tender devotion toward the illustrious Helper of Christians. He visited her many times and recited with the people the Litany of Loreto, granting 300 days of indulgence to all who would recite it there in the future (September 7, 1855). And on November 7, 1861, when the church was reopened for worship after magnificent restoration works, he himself celebrated Holy Mass at the high altar, where the venerated Image was displayed for the occasion of the annual festivities. He then left as a gift those very sacred vestments that he had used in celebrating the Holy Sacrifice.

- During the pontificate of **Leo XIII,** responding to the desire of our Fathers, the Most Reverend Vatican Chapter—which holds the right to decree and celebrate the coronation of Marian Images that in Rome enjoy the most ancient and universal devotion—decreed the solemn coronation of our prodigious Image. This was carried out with the greatest pomp and universal rejoicing on November 11, 1888. The same Supreme Pontiff (Decree of the Sacred Congregation of Rites, November 14, 1888) granted the proper Mass and Office of the Blessed Virgin Mother of Divine Providence and elevated her feast to a double rite of the first class.

- **Pius X**, of venerated memory, who kept a copy of our Madonna's Image hanging in his bedroom, recognized, reconfirmed, and expanded the indulgences, privileges, and indults that his predecessors had granted to the Archconfraternity. He granted a proper votive Mass for all the Saturdays of the year at the seat of the Archconfraternity, approved the scapular of the Mother of Divine Providence, and enriched it with a special indulgence.

- Finally, even the reigning Pontiff, **Pius XI,** in a warm audience granted to the parishioners of St. Charles at the Catinari in Rome, on May 5 of the present year 1932, did not fail to speak of our "Dear Madonna of Providence—of that Providence whose need, perhaps never before, has been felt so vividly, so urgently, and so painfully as today."

§ 4 – The Second Title of "Helper of Christians"

After having spoken of the origin and the progress of the devotion which the Image of Mary received in Rome, recognized primarily under the title of Mother of Divine Providence, we shall give a few notes about the other title of *Helper of Christians*, added to it by the Supreme Pontiff Gregory XVI.

When, in 1683, the Turks with a powerful army laid siege to Vienna, the capital of Austria, and threatened not only the ruin of that empire but also of all Catholic nations, a pious Capuchin religious, who was zealously preaching in the parish church of St. Peter in Munich, Bavaria, fervently exhorted the faithful of that city to place themselves under the patronage of the Blessed Virgin. She had already been venerated for a long time in the church bearing her name under the title of Our Lady Help of Christians, in order to obtain through her the liberation of Christian peoples from Ottoman oppression. An immense multitude of faithful gathered before the venerable Image, and with fervent prayers and tears moved the maternal heart of the Virgin to compassion. Through her intercession, the longed-for liberation of Vienna was obtained, along with a complete defeat of the infidel attackers. Maximilian, Elector of Bavaria, who had commanded part of the Christian army, upon learning what had taken place in the capital city of his electorate, requested of the Supreme Pontiff Innocent XI the establishment of a pious confederation in memory of so memorable an event.

His Holiness kindly granted the request with a Bull dated August 18, 1684, enriching the new Confraternity with various indulgences. Thus, on September 8 of the same year, while the Elector was besieging the city of Buda, this celebrated Confraternity was solemnly erected in the aforesaid church, with an extraordinary gathering of the faithful.

It is no wonder that such a useful institution spread quickly throughout the Catholic world and that its fame soon reached our Italy. Since, however, because of the distance, it was not easy to satisfy the pious desires of so many good Christians who wished to be aggregated to the new Confederation, His Holiness Pius VI granted the people of Pisa permission to erect the Confraternity of the Holy Love of Mary Most Holy, Help of Christians. This was to be considered united with that of Munich, sharing reciprocally its privileges and spiritual benefits.

After this, as devotion to the Blessed Virgin under this title was seen to be ever more effective, the Supreme Pontiff Pius VII instituted the feast on May 24 and approved the Mass and Office under the title of the great Mother of God, *Auxilium Christianorum* (Help of Christians).

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Note

Privileged Altars of the Church of St. Charles at the Catinari, in Rome.

In addition to the altar of the Blessed Virgin of Providence, the high altar and that of the Most Holy Annunciation are perpetually privileged, the latter enjoying special privileges as a Gregorian altar. The altar of St. Anne is privileged for all the Tuesdays of the year and on All Souls' Day with its Octave; the altar of St. Blaise is privileged "for seven years." By visiting seven other altars of the aforesaid church on the third Sunday of each month, one gains the same indulgences as by visiting the seven privileged altars of St. Peter's. Furthermore, all the altars are privileged during the Forty Hours' Devotion, as was granted by Pius VII (Rescript of May 10, 1807).

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